

METABOLIC RESEARCH LABORATORY

From
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Dr. Salvador E. Luria,
Department of Biology,
Room 56-423,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
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U.S.A.

Dear Dr. Luria,

As I told you over the telephone I very much welcome your letter as a starting point of a dialogue. I am most anxious that the problems I have raised in my article should be looked at from a variety of angles and that my views should be criticised, amplified and corrected. You will appreciate the article was a lecture, and the scope of going into details was therefore restricted.

I feel we should first try to clarify where exactly we disagree. I hope in fact that there are no fundamental disagreements but rather differences in emphasis.

You quite rightly say (at the bottom of your page one) that I am somewhat critical of the social sciences and that I believe that the biological approach will help. This means that I disagree with your statement that "biology today has nothing to offer that is relevant to the serious problems" [which I discussed]. You refer to "spurious biologising" leading to the assumption of the existence of congenital criminals. My view that there are congenital criminals or rather wrong-doers (who in a sense are innocent but nevertheless must be kept away from society) is based on twin studies summarized for example Curt Stern's Principles of Human Genetics, Second Edition, page 603. I consider the evidence derived from the study of identical twins as a conclusive demonstration for a genetical element in criminality. This does neither imply that there is a genetic element in every case nor that it is easy in any specific case to be sure of a genetic element in criminality.

Criminal behaviour associated with XYY chromosome trisomy (summarized recently in J. L. Hamerton's Human Cytogenetics Vol. II, 51-53, 1971) is by no means limited to black skins, as you suggest.

Apart from the systematic studies there are literally hundreds and hundreds of case histories (a few I quoted in my lecture) which confirm the genetic element in criminality. I agree that individual case histories, though they powerfully illustrate the argument, are not necessarily convincing. But as in clinical medicine case histories are invaluable in every kind of study of man.

Apropos of "spurious biologizing": as Homo sapiens is an object of biological studies it cannot be wrong to study all his aspects with the methods of biology. Of course there is spurious i.e. wrong science and right science (where spurious means neglect of the principles of the scientific method). But it would be spurious to contend that biologizing is necessarily wrong in respect to human behaviour. The impression you convey is that you disagree with this biological approach in principle. I hope, however, that I am interpreting your words wrongly.

My scepticism of the social subjects has a variety of roots:

The tremendous increase in crime since the end of World War II indicates that the efforts to contain crime have essentially been unsuccessful. It was generally believed that these efforts are the business of the social subjects. Evidentially these subjects have not discovered the origins of criminality and I interpret this failure to bring to light the major aspects of the causes of crime as an inadequacy of their methods of approach. As a natural scientist I find that the writings on social subjects are often emotional and biased, instead of being scholarly i.e. objective and detached; that they are full of semantic ambiguities. Even first-rate scientists may become unscholarly when they are faced with social problems. You make the statement (often made by representatives of the social subjects) that "society by its working creates a mass of socially and economically deprived". You imply that this deprivation is one of the roots of criminality. One might point out that there always have been societies with large numbers of deprived populations, for example, Jews in their ghettos and the peasants in many countries, but they did not resort to crime as a result of their deprivation. Thus social and economic deprivation alone cannot be blamed for criminality.

You dismiss Trotter, Lorenz and Desmond Morris as not being scientifically grounded. It is my view that there is much more science i.e. objective, reproducible, straightforward, factual material in the writings of these authors than in a large number of the writers based on sociology. Having myself been a victim of Nazi racialism I am of course very sensitive to Lorenz's aberrations. But these do not condemn his behavioural sciences - every piece of knowledge can be misused.

You refer to 'yellow' journalists. Wherever I have quoted the press I have quoted factual reports from very reputable papers, for instance the Guardian (in America known as the Manchester Guardian). You consider Plato, Ovid and Schiller as irrelevant. I must confess that I subscribe to the view, recently forcibly expressed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his Nobel lecture (himself trained as a physicist) that literature can tell the truth. This is what he said, "Writers and artists have a greater opportunity to conquer the lie. In battle with the lie, art has always been victorious, always wins out, visibly, incontrovertibly for all. The lie can stand against much in the world - but not against art". Albert Camus in his speech at the Nobel Banquet in 1957 said very much the same. You may regard this as irrelevant but I hold that if the classics have survived it is exactly because they reflect lasting fundamental truths. You will appreciate that I have not quoted the authors as evidence but as supporters of my views.

It is very difficult within a letter to debate these complex questions. It so happens that I shall be in Boston at the end of May 1973 to take part in the Symposium on the History of Bioenergetics organized by John Edsall. I hope that we might then continue our dialogue face to face, and that we can then formulate precisely the area where we agree and where we disagree on this problem of the relative importance of nature and nurture.

To sum up: Do you really hold the view that the biological approach - especially genetics and the behavioural sciences applying to man - has nothing useful to contribute to the social problems of our time? Details of my treatment may well be debatable but I would defend the view that my approach has much to offer. This does not mean that social subjects are not equally important, but alone, without a broad infiltration by biology they cannot succeed.

I look forward to studying your forthcoming book.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Hans Krebs

H. A. Krebs.